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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 001184

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DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ELA
NSC FOR GAVITO/SINGH/ABRAMS
PARIS FOR JORDAN; LONDON FOR TSOU

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/16/2017
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [SY](#)
SUBJECT: WHITE HOUSE STATEMENT ON NATIONAL COUNCIL RECEIVED
POSITIVELY, SOME WORRY ABOUT TIMING

REF: A. DAMASCUS 1170

[1](#)B. DAMASCUS 1156
[1](#)C. 12/15 EMBASSY DAMASCUS-ELA EMAIL

Classified By: CDA Michael Corbin, for reasons 1.4 b/d.

[1](#)1. (S) Summary: A quick survey of human rights and opposition contacts yielded mostly positive reactions to the December 14 White House statement on the creation of the National Council. National Council Secretariat Riad Seif, who had earlier requested such support, warned the night before the statement's release that it would be better to delay any official USG recognition for the time being. Seif also named an authorized contact outside of Syria to discuss democracy assistance with the USG. On balance, the White House communication will draw much-needed attention to the National Council. Our ability to convince other countries to echo this message publicly would reduce the Council's exposure to anti-U.S. critics and enhance the credibility of Syrian human rights and opposition activists. End Summary.

Seif Authorizes Channel to Discuss Democracy Assistance

[1](#)2. (S) Poloff and NEA/MEPI Senior Advisor Owen Kirby met December 13 with National Council Secretariat Riad Seif to follow up previous discussions (ref A) regarding possible channels for U.S. democracy assistance to the newly-formed National Council. Seif recounted the GID visit to his home the previous evening, during which security services attempted to disrupt a meeting of the NC's 12-member Executive Committee (reported ref A). The Executive Committee elected Seif as its Chairman, who has the power to appoint foreign-based contacts to represent the Committee. On that basis, Seif said he authorized Movement for Justice and Development representative Ausama Munajed to represent him in discussions with the USG about democracy assistance. Seif emphasized the sensitivity of this subject and reported that only a few other trusted members of the Executive Committee knew of this decision.

Seif: Timing Not Right for U.S. Statement

13. (C) Seif shared with us his plans to meet with Syrian Arab Socialist Union Party leader Hassan Abdul Azzim later that same evening. "He won't end his freeze on participating in the National Council," Seif explained, but it was important preserve ties with Abdul Azzim and let him know he was welcome back. (Note: As reported Ref B, it was Abdul Azzim's insistence on anti-American statements in the NC platform that had prevented consensus among Damascus Declaration leaders in favor of launching the National Council. Only after Abdul Azzim failed to gain a leadership position did the National Council succeed in winning a majority vote in favor of launching the NC and removing anti-U.S. slogans from its declaration.)

14. (C) Seif, who had asked previously for statements of U.S. support, said it would be tactically advantageous for the NC if the USG would hold any public statements of support that could be used by Abdul Azim and other opponents to accuse the NC of being a "U.S. puppet." Poloffs and Kirby asked Seif if his request would apply to a possible statement by the White House. "It's too soon," Seif responded, noting that press reports of the President's meeting with Syrian dissidents in Washington were starting to hit the news. Seif said he preferred to wait a little longer until these reports ran their course and the NC could better deflect criticism inside Syria. Poloff explained that we had expressed our support for Seif's previous position in honor of a statement, but would convey to Washington Seif's latest thinking on this subject (ref C).

Initial Reactions

DAMASCUS 00001184 002 OF 002

15. (C) Poloff saw Seif briefly December 16 to share the White House's December 14 statement and gauge his reaction. Seif characterized the statement content as positive, but he reiterated his worry that the timing was wrong. The statement opened up the National Council to internal criticism at a time when the SARG was looking to restrict its meetings and undermine its credibility, according to Seif. Seif emphasized, as he had in previous conversations, that publicized USG meetings with "so-called" opposition figures living outside Syria, particularly Mahmoud Homsy, sent the wrong signal to democracy activists in Syria. While still early for reactions, several other civil society contacts told Embassy's senior FSN that they thought the White House statement was positive and it would have a net beneficial effect.

16. (C) Comment: Seif's concerns about timing notwithstanding, we believe the December 14 White House statement will help to shed much-needed attention on the newly-created National Council. We will continue to solicit reactions in the run up to the Eid, but thus far the buzz has been positive. Similar statements of support by European and other countries would help reduce the NC's exposure to anti-U.S. critics here and enhance the credibility of Syrian human rights and opposition activists.
CORBIN